The Last Enemy: The Howling Nights
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/24620707.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M, Gen
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	James Potter/Lily Evans Potter, Sirius Black & James Potter, Sirius Black & Remus Lupin & Peter Pettigrew & James Potter, Sirius Black & Remus Lupin, Lily Evans Potter & Severus Snape, Regulus Black & Sirius Black, Remus Lupin & Lily Evans Potter, Remus Lupin & James Potter
Character:	James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew, Lily Evans Potter, Severus Snape, Regulus Black, Marlene McKinnon, Mary Macdonald, Caradoc Dearborn
Additional Tags:	Marauders, Marauders Era (Harry Potter), Canon Compliant, Marauders Friendship (Harry Potter), Rise of Voldemort, Prequel, POV Multiple, Hogwarts Fifth Year, References to Illness, Implied/Referenced Abuse, Implied/Referenced Character Death, jily, Slow Burn, wolfstar, but reaaaaal slow, Grief/Mourning, Angst, Epic Friendship, Politics, Pureblood Society (Harry Potter), First War with Voldemort
Series:	Part 1 of The Last Enemy
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-10 Updated: 2020-06-22 Chapters: 6/54 Words: 18915

The Last Enemy: The Howling Nights

by CH_Darling

Summary

It’s 1975 and war is simmering beneath the surface of the Wizarding world...but at Hogwarts, it’s magic as usual as the fifth years prepare for their O.W.L.s amidst politics, pranks, and other poor choices.

Severus Snape wants to prove his worth.
Lily Evans wants a fresh start.
James Potter wants Lily Evans, though no one is more surprised by this than him.
Sirius Black wants to write himself a new story.
Remus Lupin wants to survive the next moon.
Peter Pettigrew just wants to keep up.

But as tensions bubble over, sides will be chosen, friendships destroyed, families parted, and paths forever altered.

The Howling Nights is the first book of The Last Enemy series, which follows the lives of the heroes and villains of the First Wizarding War from 1975-1981. (New chapters posted weekly!)

The last enemy
that shall be destroyed
is death.
(1 Corinthians 15:26)

Don't go 'round tonight
It's bound to take your life
There's a bad moon on the rise
(Bad Moon Rising, Creedence Clearwater Revival)

JAMES

Mirror, Mirror

“It’s no go, mate,” a sullen voice declared into the candlelit gloaming of a dim bedroom. The owner of this bedroom — a tall, angular youth with dark-framed glasses and darker hair — was sprawled aslant in an overstuffed armchair, his legs stretched out and resting upon a large, leather trunk. A cluster of candles floated around him, giving the odd impression of a fiery crown.

The boy, whose name was James Potter, was peering into a small, grubby mirror — but it was not his own reflection that looked back. Instead, his best friend Sirius Black grimaced at him through the glass. It was from here the sullen voice came.

“I swear,” said Sirius from the mirror, “Mummy darling’s gone even madder this summer. There’s no way she’s going to let me come.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” complained James. “What’s changed?”

“Apart from her rapidly-eroding sanity, you mean? I reckon she’s decided once and for all that the Potter family tree is a giant cesspool of blood traitors and Muggle-lovers.”

“You came to stay *last* year.”

“That was before your dad was publicly quoted in the *Daily Prophet* calling Abraxas Malfoy a ‘bigoted old buffoon.’”

“Aha, yeah, good ol’ dad,” snickered James. He swatted away one of the candles, as it was veering a little too near his forehead.

“Watch out,” advised Sirius. “You’re going to set the drapes on fire again.”

“Never mind them,” said James, knocking another candle away from the thick velvet curtains that hung plushly before the tall windows (and showed irrefutable evidence of prior singeing). “This is rubbish. It’s bad enough you missed the Puddlemere United match, but now I won’t even see you until the start of term?”

“I’m not exactly chuffed myself.”

“What if I come to you?”

“Bad idea, mate,” said Sirius darkly.

James scowled into the distance. He’d never been to his friend’s home, nor even met his family beyond one brief interaction at King’s Cross. Sirius preferred it that way; he’d made it clear he didn’t want James to have anything to do with them. James understood this, to a degree. After all, Sirius’s parents were not nice people. They were what James’s mother might refer to as ‘ultra-traditionalists,’ or what James’s father might refer to as ‘bigoted old buffoons.’

The Blacks were one of Wizarding Britain’s most noble and aristocratic pure-blood families. They were famous for their fabulous wealth, dominating political power, and uncompromising stance on blood purity. The Potters, in the Blacks’ view, did not quite rate. The name ‘Potter’ had long been dropped from the Sacred Twenty-Eight, an anonymously published bible of pure-blood families that the Blacks topped both alphabetically and fanatically. This fact, coupled with Mr. Potter’s outspoken political views on Muggle rights, meant that the Blacks did not much approve of their son’s friendship with a certain James Potter.

James wasn’t all too bothered by this, for he did not much approve of the Blacks.

Still, it was annoying, as now their dislike of him was interfering with his summer plans. For a while, Sirius’s family had at least tolerated James. He may be the son of Muggle-lovers, but they were at least pure-bloods. All that seemed to be a thing of the past, however. Almost immediately after Sirius had returned to his London home for the summer holiday, his parents had whisked him off to his uncle’s country house where they evidently thought he’d be safe from the pernicious influences of blood traitors and Muggle-lovers like the Potters.

They didn’t know about the mirrors though, thought James with smug satisfaction.

“How is it, at your uncle’s?”

“Foul,” said Sirius. “I don’t know where old Alphard got the idea that I give a rat’s arse about horses or hunting. Never thought I’d miss bloody Grimmauld Place.”

“Did you at least get a chance to look at the library?”

“Yeah.”

James leaned forward in excitement. “And? Did you find anything?”

“If you want to learn how to curse off your enemy’s genitals? Yes. If you want to learn how to become an Animagus? No luck.”

“Damn.” James sunk back into his chair, disappointed.

“I told you not to get your hopes up. The only books in that rubbish library are about ancestry and evil. What else would you expect? It was curated by a bunch of Dark Arts-loving swine…”

Disappointed though he may be by the results of Sirius’s search, James felt a swell of pride at his friend’s ongoing tirade. Sirius hated Dark Magic as much as James. He wasn’t anything like his fanatical, blood supremacist family. That had been made clear when he’d been sorted into Gryffindor House with James back in first year. Sirius, unlike his rotten relatives, was good.

“…and if I have to sit through another tea with Narcissa and her slimy Death Eater boyfriend, I’m going to lose it, James, I really will. Lucius bloody Malfoy. Going on and on about how the Death Eaters are upholding the Black family traditions of blood supremacy and — oh yeah, they murder children for fun. Isn’t that *grand*, darling?”

James felt his stomach drop. Sirius had undoubtedly seen the article in the *Daily Prophet* last week about the Muggle family in Leeds found brutally murdered…three children, all under the age of ten…

“I thought they hadn’t connected that to Death Eaters.”

Sirius grunted. “Not officially.”

Death Eaters. Once a whisper in the newspapers, a rumor, a conspiracy theory, the name was cropping up more and more often. And though it was never printed, never mentioned in the inky columns of the Prophet, everyone somehow knew the name that went before it, the name even James’s own parents refused to speak…the one they called You-Know-Who.

Sirius was still talking. “And of course, my idiot brother just laps it all up. It’s disgusting, watching him suck up to mummy and dear Uncle Alphard. He’s pathetic, just trying to show off, to be their good little pure-blood son. You know, sometimes I wonder if I should’ve been harder on him as a kid. Let him fight his own battles, instead of always taking the brunt of it. Maybe then he wouldn’t be so enamored with Black family values…”

Sirius trailed off here. He hardly ever spoke about his childhood, but James suspected it had not been very nice.

“Look,” said James consolingly, “when do you get back to London?”

“A week. But it’s not any better there.”

“I know, but do you think you could sneak out? Just for the day? I could meet you in Diagon Alley.”

Sirius thought about it. “I probably could, if we did it on a weekday. They always have *something* going on.” He brightened a bit at this idea. “How about that Thursday?”

James agreed and quickly extinguished the arm of his chair: It was smoldering.

When Thursday arrived, James woke with the birds. He was an early riser by nature, and today he was excited. He and Sirius had agreed to meet at the Leaky Cauldron at half-past eleven. The time was chosen because Mr. and Mrs. Black were likely to have left for their various appointments and social obligations by then, giving Sirius an easy escape. He had to be secretive about it, because they were weird about him going into London without them.

It was ten-til-nine, and James was impatient.

The problem with the summer holiday, he felt, was that there was simply nothing to *do*. Sure, he enjoyed a break from classes and exams as much as the next student, but he missed the constant buzz of activity in the castle, the clamor of people filling halls.

Unlike Hogwarts, his own home was very quiet. Potter House was a big, rambling, old place, tucked away in a cozy corner of the Cotswolds, and for most of the summer James rattled about in it, bored. He hated being bored. His parents were around, of course, but they had their own concerns. His father's health had long teetered near the edge of trouble, and lately things had gotten worse.

If James wasn't careful, if he spent too many idle hours lying on his bed doing nothing, then he got rather sad about it.

So he kept busy. In the mornings, after a hardy breakfast, he took to the field behind Potter House to practice Quidditch. James was a Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and he was very good, but he could always get better.

In the evenings or on rainy days, he spent most of his time teaching himself new spells and jinxes. He'd convinced his mother that it didn't matter if he did underage magic outside of school, despite the strict laws prohibiting it. The Trace, he had reasoned, only told the Ministry *where* the magic was being used, and as they were a Wizarding home, no one need ever know the spells came from a certain fifteen-year-old boy. And wasn't it *better*, he had insisted, that he use the summers to study and learn new magic, rather than lolling around for months on end, doing absolutely nothing?

His mother had laughed, ruffled his hair, and agreed that "as long as he didn't burn the house down," she couldn't see any harm.

Good ol' mum.

His parents had already left for the morning. His father had yet another 'routine' checkup at St. Mungo's, and his mother had accompanied him, as she always did. They would be gone for most of the day, as they always were. Not that they would mind if he went to Diagon Alley on his own. They weren't controlling, like Sirius's parents. James more or less did whatever he pleased.

After finishing breakfast, James was dismayed to see he still had yet another hour to kill, so he wandered down the hall to the library, a room he had come to haunt over the summer. The library at Potter House was a very handsome room, lined with dark mahogany bookcases and crammed to capacity with lovely calf-bound tomes of every size and color. A marble table, piled with ever more books, anchored the center of the room, and a worn sofa of faded rose velvet was pushed back in the cozy recess between the shelves. A large, sloped fireplace dominated the eastern wall, and as James crossed the room, he ran a finger absently over the grooves of a small, triangular carving in the chimney breast. An old habit, a superstitious ritual for luck. He barely noticed he

was doing it.

With a sigh, he settled himself down at the marble table and grabbed a stack of books he had piled there the night previously. The library's collection was vast and varied. It had been curated by an eccentric mishmash of generations of Potters. On its shelves sat books on potion-brewing, medical magic, and healing teas. Compendiums on herbalism and treatises on Kneazle-breeding. Heavy, brick-like tomes of Transfigurative theory and wispy little manuscripts on experimental charms. *An Encyclopedia of Fungi* sat next to *A Treasury of Toad-Keeping*. There were books on art and architecture, literature and plays, more than one edition of *The Tales of Beedle Bard*, and even a very dusty corner devoted to eighteen-century efforts in gnome breeding. What it did not have, so far as any of James's scholarly expeditions had uncovered, were instructions on how to become an Animagus.

Another glance at his watch, another sigh, and James selected a hefty volume from the stack and began to read. He didn't really expect to find anything. He'd been through just about every book on Transfiguration in the collection. ("My little scholar!" exclaimed his mum, upon finding him holed up in the library for the fourth time that week.) All the books talked about Animagi — it was, after all, considered the pinnacle of Transfigurative magic — but none seemed to give the exact measures for how to properly *do* the thing. James had probably read everything ever scribbled on theory, but when it came to implementation, the books were fuzzy and vague.

The thing about becoming an Animagus was that it was a bit complicated…and a bit illegal. Well, not illegal exactly, but you had to register yourself with the Ministry of Magic, which was not something James had any intention of doing. Secrecy for this mission was essential, which meant his options for learning were limited to books, and here he had hit a dead end.

James scratched his nose and ran a finger along the wall of text, looking for anything new. He stopped suddenly and straightened his glasses as a phrase caught his eye: *The Infallible Animagus*. He had seen that before, in the bibliography of another book at the school library. He hadn't been able to find it in the stacks though, which meant it was probably in the Restricted Section. This was bad luck because you needed a professor's approval to get a book from there, and professors very rarely approved of anything James Potter did.

Nonetheless, he flagged the page in the book and carried on with his reading.

It had been several years since James first got the bug in his brain to become an Animagus. The ability to turn into an animal at will, apart from simply being really cool, seemed like the perfect solution to his most perplexing problem.

The problem went something like this: At school, James had three best friends: Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin. The four boys shared a dormitory, which suited them marvelously, as it provided a ready-made private headquarters to plan their mischief (of which they made much). It also meant that, living in such close quarters, it was very difficult to keep secrets from each other.

Remus had learned this the hard way. Because the thing was, Remus Lupin had a very big secret. Though James and Sirius had bonded from the first moment they met, it took a bit longer for the others, shy and awkward creatures as they'd been. But James had been intrigued by the quiet boy who shared his dormitory, a boy who was at once so guarded, and yet so clearly desperate to make friends. James appreciated his sense of humor, which was clever and sharp and often surprising, such that his victim didn't get the joke until Remus was several paces away. It wasn't long before Remus, and then Peter, were assimilated into the Gryffindor gang that now comprised of four.

But Remus Lupin kept disappearing. Once a month, every month, he was just gone…and when he came back…well, he rather looked like he'd been attacked by an angry hippogriff. By their second

year, the boys had figured it out. Being only twelve, they had not yet developed the sense of incredulity that would make adults laugh and look for another explanation. Because the thing was, Remus Lupin was a werewolf.

“Cool,” Sirius had said when Remus at last confirmed their suspicions.

But it wasn’t cool. Not really. James had been watching for four years as his friend went off by himself into some secret agony. There was nothing he could do, short of bringing lots of sweets to the hospital wing the next morning, and it was driving him mad.

Peter was the one who gave him the idea. One morning, after a particularly rough full moon, Peter, Sirius, and James were all sitting around Remus’s bed in the hospital wing, when Peter blurted out: “I wish we were all werewolves, then we could just go with you.”

Remus did not like this much, saying it was a terrible thing to wish, but the idea stuck in James’s head. No, they couldn’t become werewolves, of course. But…why couldn’t they go with him? What if they became some other sort of animal? Werewolves couldn’t hurt other animals, you see. Couldn’t turn them, at least. If they became animals, they could go along with Remus when he transformed and — well, he didn’t know exactly what they would do, but then at least he wouldn’t have to be alone.

James hated being alone.

He glanced at his watch: Forty-five minutes to go.

At eleven o’clock, James decided he couldn’t wait any longer. Shoving a useless text back on the shelf, he marched to the kitchen. He would have to travel by Floo, unlike Sirius, who lived in town and enjoyed using the Muggle Underground. James had been on the Underground exactly once — last summer, with Sirius — and he’d found it far more disconcerting to hurtle through tunnels below the city than through something sensible, like chimneys.

Collecting the small velvet sachet his mother kept on a hook by the hearth, James dispensed a pinch of shimmering powder into his palm and threw it into the fire. The fireplace burst with green flames; James stepped through, proclaimed “Diagon Alley!” and went spinning into the blurred network of grates.

He stepped out onto the warm stone hearth of the Leaky Cauldron. The pub was dimly lit and rather emptier than James was used to seeing it, but he supposed it *was* rather early in the day. Of course, that didn’t stop him from trying to convince the bartender to serve him something stronger than butterbeer.

“You forget, son, I know your parents,” the bartender growled, though he looked amused.

“Bad luck,” said a voice behind him. “Guess you’ve still got your baby face.”

James spun on his heel. Sirius Black was grinning at him, hands stuffed into pockets, slouching in a pair of Muggle jeans and a t-shirt. He looked taller — which was annoying — and, as always, cool. James was delighted to see him. With a galumphing cry, he threw his arms around his friend and pulled him into a hug.

“All right, all right. Keep it in your pants, mate,” said Sirius, laughing as he pushed him off.

James grinned. “Two butterbeers, then,” he told the bartender, who handed them each a foaming mug. “Blimey, I’ve missed you,” said James as they settled into a pair of shabby armchairs across the pub. “This might go down in history as the most boring summer yet.”

“Tell me about it. I thought I was going to claw my own face off.”

“At least it’s almost over, eh?”

“Cheers to that.” Sirius let out a short, mirthless laugh. “You know, the bitch threatened not to let me go back to school this year.”

“What?”

“Yeah, something about it being better to have a drop-out for a son than a blood traitor. I dunno, I tuned her out.” He took a swig of his drink. “Like she could stop me.”

James frowned, observing his friend closely from behind his butterbeer. He was troubled to see the same lines of misery from their last conversation still etched onto Sirius’s face, and there was something hollow about his voice that was unsettling.

“Well,” said James, “never mind that nonsense. Next summer, I have a plan: I’m just going to steal you off the train before Walburga can get her greedy little hands on you. Can’t exile you to the country if they can’t find you.”

Sirius snorted. “Uh huh. Sure.”

“I mean it! It’s not technically kidnapping if it’s another kid doing the napping, right?”

“Cute.”

“You think I’m joking, but no court would convict me. Besides, I think I could make a very compelling case for legally adopting you. You may call me ‘Papa.’”

Sirius choked on his butterbeer. “First of all, you prat, I’m older than you.”

“Minor legal complication,” agreed James. “Second of all?”

“Second of all…” Sirius shook his head and a grin spread across his face. There he was, his old friend. “Second of all, I’ve missed you, you fucking idiot.”

James beamed.

They finished their drinks and headed towards the shops. Both boys had already done their school shopping — or rather, their mothers had ordered their things — but they still found plenty to look at, lingering for a particularly long time in the cluttered corridors of Gambol and Jape’s, the joke shop, restocking their arsenal for the year. Quite a few items in this shop had been banned at Hogwarts thanks to the efforts of the Gryffindor boys, and this was something of a point of pride.

After the joke shop, James dragged Sirius to Quality Quidditch Supplies, where he spent rather too

much time waxing poetic over the various broomstick models. James had a theory that he could make Sirius care more about Quidditch through exposure and sheer force of will, although four years of this treatment had not made much difference. Sirius's eyes glazed with boredom as James went on about the tailwind of the latest Comet model, and eventually James relented and suggested they move on to Flourish & Blott's. He wanted to see if they had any new books on Animagi that might be useful in their quest.

Sirius was skeptical. "We've been looking for years, and you really think Flourish & Blott's just happened to get something in with their latest shipment on Tuesday?"

"What can I say?" shrugged James. "I'm an optimist."

The bookstore was the most crowded shop they'd visited yet, stuffed with students and their parents doing last minute shopping for school, but James plowed through the masses straight back to the Transfiguration section. He'd been here more than a few times this summer and knew his way around. "All right," he told Sirius, "I'll take this aisle, you take the one over there."

And so James moseyed up and down the aisle, checking the spines of books for anything of interest, anything he hadn't already read, but he was disappointed. He decided to try the next row.

As he rounded the corner, something in the aisle across from him pulled his attention from the rows of spines. A red-haired girl dressed in Muggle clothes had her nose so deep in a book she might've been smelling it. A smirk spread across James's face. It was Lily Evans. She was a classmate and one of his and Sirius's favorite people to annoy. This was mostly because it was so easy to wind her up, but also because she was friends with James's arch nemesis, a boy called Severus Snape.

He sauntered over. He couldn't help himself.

"Having an intimate moment, are we?"

She looked up from her book, and he was pleased to see her cheeks flushing red. Back in third year, he and Sirius had devised a competition to see who could get Evans' face to match her hair. *Ten points for the ears…*

"Oh," she said, sounding very unimpressed. "It's you."

"Nice to see you too." James leaned casually against the bookshelf and began to leaf through a crisp, leather-bound tome. "Forgive me if I don't kiss it," he said, motioning to the book. "See, I like to keep my relationship with literature purely platonic. Too much heartbreak."

Lily placed the book she'd been sniffing back onto the shelf and gave him a deliberate looking over. He felt a twinge of self-consciousness at her gaze and ran a hand through his hair.

"You must get so bored over the summer," she said at last, "without the usual suspects to torment."

James laughed. "You have no idea. And clearly you've missed school. Sniffing books. Going through withdrawal from all the swotting, are you?"

"Well, you know what they say. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Funny how it doesn't seem to work with you."

"Charming," said James.

They glowered at each other for a moment, James smirking and Lily scowling, but then Sirius's

voice came floating from the other aisle: “Oi, did you find anything?”

“Not yet,” called James in return. “But come see what I found instead.”

Sirius strolled around the corner, his bored expression mingling with faint surprise at the sight of their classmate. “Oh. Hullo, Evans.”

“Black,” said Lily, and she looked even less pleased to see him than she had James.

James couldn’t help but think that a good round of Evans-baiting would cheer his friend up immensely, but Sirius didn’t seem very interested. “So did you find anything or not?”

“Nothing,” sighed James, with a despondent glance back at the shelves. He’d abandoned his hunt to come annoy Lily Evans, but he knew there was nothing there. The words *Infallible Animagus* were still humming in his brain. That was the book he needed, he knew it.

“Told you so,” said Sirius.

“Yeah, yeah. The pessimist is proven right. The world is a dark and unforgiving place. Huzzah.”

“What are you looking for?” asked Lily, who had been listening to this exchange with a curious expression. Oops. James shot a warning glance at Sirius. The last thing they needed was nosy Lily Evans trying to figure out what they were up to. They’d already had Severus Snape on their case for years.

“A book,” said James lightly. “We *are* in a bookstore, you see. I reckon you’re familiar with the concept, what with all the page-sniffing.”

It worked. Lily rolled her eyes, and they were back to verbal sparring. “Do you have to practice being so insufferable, or does it just come naturally?”

“What can I say, it’s a gift.”

“If it were my gift, I’d ask for a receipt.” And with a dismissive look she scooped up the stack of books at her feet and began to walk away, but then Sirius called after her: “See you later, Penny Prefect.”

This stopped Lily in her tracks. She glanced back over her shoulder. “Who told you I was made a prefect?”

Sirius smirked. “You did, just now. Bet you’re awfully chuffed. Tough luck, though. We’ve got one on our side this year.” He clapped James on the back victoriously, and James grinned, pleased that Sirius had picked up the sport.

Lily’s expression turned to pure horror. “Not you—!”

Both boys erupted into laughter.

“Merlin, can you imagine?”

“Dumbledore would have to be mad. No, Lupin.”

“Oh,” Lily sighed, clearly relieved. “And I suppose you think he’ll let you get away with everything?”

“Er…obviously,” said James.

“Well, it’s a good thing there are two prefects, then.”

“Oh yes,” agreed Sirius with a solemn nod. “Thank Merlin, Penny Prefect is on the job. You’re not going to stalk us, are you? I know you can’t get enough of my lad James here, but that would be a slight abuse of power, don’t you think?”

“Oooh, I get it. Because I’m so obsessed with you.” Lily Evans made eye-rolling look a professional sport. “Aren’t you boys ever going to grow up?”

“Not if I can help it,” said Sirius.

“All right, Peter Pan. This has been fun, but I’ve got to go meet someone I actually like. Give my love to the other lost boys. Oh, and Potter? No hard feelings, right?”

James looked at her blankly. “What?”

“For when you try and sabotage me as a prefect, and in retaliation I end up assigning detentions during every Quidditch practice? All’s fair, right?”

This shut him up for a moment. James narrowed his eyes. “You know,” he said slowly. “I don’t think you’ve got the nerve.”

She smiled. “Let’s find out.”

“You mess with Quidditch and you’ll have the whole house against you.”

“Gee, wonder what that’s like.” A small laugh, soft and derisive. “God knows after last year Gryffindor needs all the practice it can get. Best not to piss me off, then. Enjoy the rest of your summer, boys.” And with a final, taut smile, she turned on her heel and walked away.

James glared after her, feeling unreasonably irritated. Gryffindor’s embarrassing defeat last term was still a sore subject.

“She’s all talk,” said Sirius with a dismissive wave, turning back to the books. “Hey, here’s one: *Animagus Unveiled.*”

“No, I’ve read that,” said James grumpily, pulling his lingering gaze back to his friend. “It’s mostly about the legal stuff…boring. What’s the point? I’ve read all of these.”

Sirius arched an eyebrow. “You’ve been busy.”

“It’s been a long summer.”

LILY

The Millworker's Son

A strange mixture of irritation and elation rose in Lily Evans' chest as she pushed her way through the crowded aisles of Flourish & Blott's and joined the queue to pay for her books. The appearance of James Potter and Sirius Black had definitely dampened her day, yet she couldn't help but feel rather pleased with herself. She had held her own against them and come out victorious.

Never mind that she had practiced that confrontation in her head all summer. She didn't like to admit how much space those boys took up in her brain, even when she wasn't at school, but she'd known they'd give her grief about being a prefect — they gave her grief about everything — and she couldn't resist winning a few imaginary arguments in her own head, usually while simmering in the bath.

And never mind that she'd still flushed deep crimson when Potter had startled her, just like he'd known she would. (*Ten points for the ears*…she was well aware of their mean little game.) Or that she had felt so damn self-conscious, standing there in her Muggle clothes with her stack of tatty, second-hand books, facing off against those two. (Sirius Black, arguably the richest boy in school, had probably never even *touched* a second-hand book.)

None of that mattered, because she had been able to walk away with her head held high and her dignity intact. That was worth everything, with those boys. She'd even — impossibly — had the last word. And the look on Potter's face when she had threatened to give him detention during Quidditch! Oh, it had been delicious. It was an empty threat, of course — they both knew she'd never actually do it — but it was her threat to make, and it annoyed him, and that felt good.

"That'll be six galleons and seven knuts, miss."

Pulled from her celebratory musings, Lily suppressed a sigh as she dug in her purse for the necessary coins, emptying it of all but a few solitary sickles.

She had taken up a summer job at the Railview Inn to help pay for her books this year. She'd worked all summer clearing tables at the restaurant and it was still just barely enough. Her dad proudly gave her money each year for school, but the pound to galleon exchange rate had grown so lopsided that this contribution barely covered a set of standard potion supplies. She didn't have the heart to tell him this, of course. She told him the job was good for her, and it was. It kept her busy,

kept her from spending the whole summer doing nothing but haunting the corners of their now-hollow home. Dad had his sermons to distract him, and Petunia had her friends. But Lily? Lily had nothing to do all summer in Cokeworth but stew in memory. So she spent all her time working at the Railview Inn and told her dad it was for 'fun money.'

The shop bell chimed merrily as she stepped out into the sunlit streets of Diagon Alley. It wasn't a complete lie, she reasoned, her shopping bag swinging with a satisfactory heft. Her school books *were* fun — to her, anyway. Black and Potter liked to tease her for being an over-earnest swot — where they got off, she didn't know, as those two were consistently top of the class — and all right, she *did* spend a lot of time in the library, and fine, she supposed she *did* always have her nose stuck in a book, but how couldn't she, with books like these?

Growing up as a Muggle, she'd always been a voracious reader. These things tend to happen to a child who isn't allowed to play with the neighbors because she accidentally turned their dog blue. But ever since she'd discovered she was a witch…why, there weren't enough hours in the day for all the books she wanted to read, all the things she wanted to learn. How could anyone not be fascinated by books about spells and potions and enchantments and dragons? Honestly, wizards took so much for granted.

The sun beat down upon her back as she wandered aimlessly past glimmering shopfronts, but they were less enticing now that her purse was nearly empty. She debated going to get an ice cream. She shouldn't. She should save her money — she'd still need some at school — but the idea was awfully enticing. It was very hot, and she still had god knows how long to wait…maybe she'd just walk that way and see what the specials were…

But as she continued down the lane towards Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, the crowd began to tangle to a tight knot. Lily perched on the tips of her toes to see what was happening. There was some sort of gathering up ahead. A man was standing on a small platform, brandishing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and shouting. He was young, probably in his late twenties, with a slight paunch and a mop of reddish brown curls. His features, which might've otherwise been described as soft, were set in hard, furious lines. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but the crowd did not seem to like it. Curious, she pushed forward.

The curly-haired man seemed to have been delivering some sort of oratory but was now locked in an argument with a ragged-looking witch in the crowd.

"They take all our bleedin' jobs!" shouted the witch. "'Ow am I s'posed to feed my children if we keep givin' all our jobs to them Muggles?"

"You're equating non-magical people with those born of them!" said the curly-haired man in frustration. "Muggle-borns are magical and every bit as deserving of employment as —"

There was a roar of disapproval from the crowd.

"If there aren't enough jobs to go around," the man tried again, "it's because the magical world operates on an economic theory straight out of the Middle Ages, for the love of Merlin! Whose fault is that?"

"The money-grubbing goblins, I'd say!" shouted someone from the crowd.

The curly-haired man was losing his temper. "That's exactly the sort of attitude that keeps us stagnant! Until the magical community is willing to grapple with the inequality inherent in its system of governance, we'll never—"

But the man was drowned out by the jeers and laughter of the crowd, which was quickly becoming more mob-like in both appearance and attitude. “What’s next, squib rights?” sneered someone from behind her. Lily glanced around, suddenly very conscious of her Muggle clothing. A pockmarked man a few feet away leered at her. Then, someone slipped a hand into hers. She turned sharply, but breathed a sigh of relief as she peered into the pale face of Severus Snape.

“C’mon,” he muttered. “I don’t think we should be here right now.”

“I thought you were going to wait for me in the bookstore.”

They were outside now, back in London, the din of Diagon Alley swallowed up by the little pub that served as portal between the worlds of magic and Muggle. Charing Cross Road stretched onward before them. The hot, sticky scent of garbage wafted from bins along the brick wall behind them.

Lily made a face. “I thought *you* weren’t going to take very long pawning off your illegal goods.”

“They’re not illegal,” Severus protested automatically. “They just have a very particular market, that’s all.”

“Obviously, since you had to take them to Knockturn Alley to sell them.”

“Not everything in Knockturn Alley is illegal. That’s very small-minded of you.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “You know I’m just annoyed because you said I couldn’t come along, right?”

“I wasn’t — it’s not that — I mean, you’re wearing Muggle clothes.”

Severus was also wearing Muggle clothes, but the difference, she supposed, was that he didn’t look like he belonged in them. He never had. From the moment she’d met him at age eleven, Severus had always had the distinct look of someone who did not belong in the Muggle world. Someone magical. This was a quality that Severus apparently felt Lily lacked.

“It’s not that I didn’t want you to come, it’s just there are some people in Knockturn Alley who wouldn’t — I mean —”

“I know, I know,” Lily cut him off, suddenly tired of the conversation. “Have you got a fag?”

Severus fumbled in the pockets of his torn trousers and pulled out a pack of cheap cigarettes. He handed her one and lit it with a small plastic lighter. Normally they’d use a wand, but underage students weren’t allowed to use magic outside of school. Lily herself had already received a few less-than-friendly reminders of this from the Ministry of Magic over the years.

“Bless you,” she said, exhaling deeply after a long drag. “You sure she doesn’t mind, your mum? You selling her things?”

Severus, busy lighting his own cigarette, did not look up. “Doubt she’s noticed.”

“Don’t you think you should tell her?”

Severus let out a disdainful snort. “She won’t miss them. And my dad certainly won’t. Besides, I

have to buy my school supplies somehow."

Lily could hardly argue with that. Hadn't she taken up a summer job for the same purpose? Of course, that was somewhat different from pilfering your mother's magical belongings for profit, but what other options did he have, really? The very quality that made Severus able to walk unbothered through the streets of Knockturn Alley made it infinitely more difficult for him to pass in Cokeworth. The Muggles knew something was off about him; they just didn't know it was magic.

Lily was very curious about Severus's mum. She was a witch, after all. A witch who had married a Muggle man from Cokeworth, of all places. Lily thought there must be an interesting story there, but Severus never talked about his parents if he could help it. What little Lily knew came from a glimpse through a door nearly five years ago.

It had been a few days after she'd first met him, on that little playground in Cokeworth. Severus had shown up, looking strange in too-short trousers and a ludicrously large coat. He'd told her she was a witch and then called Petunia a Muggle. Neither of the girls had known what that meant, but assuming it was an insult, they'd stormed off. However, his words had echoed in her brain…

"It's obvious, isn't it? You're…you're a witch."

From a young age, Lily had known she could do strange things. Strange things that scared Petunia and troubled her parents. What if was true? she'd thought. What if she *was* a witch?

She'd shown up at Spinner's End a few days later. It was the rough part of town, and she'd had to knock on several doors before she'd found him, but eventually, at the very end of the row, Severus had opened the door.

He had looked smaller than before, framed in the crack between door and jamb. He'd been half-delighted, half-horrified to see her. From within the house, she'd heard yelling, a woman's rasping shriek and the harsh guttural obscenities of a man filled with rage.

"What are you doing here?" he'd whispered.

"I — I want to know more about being a witch," she'd said uncertainly, glancing over his shoulder again. He'd flinched.

"I can't talk now. Meet me on the playground. Tomorrow." And then he'd slammed the door shut.

Lily had never been to his home since.

A slice of sharp words cut through the street, pulling her thoughts back to the present. The Leaky Cauldron's door burst open and a few harried-looking witches rushed out. Lily cast a nervous glance into the pub as the door swung shut, and her mind was suddenly drawn back to Diagon Alley, to the jeering crowd, the frightened expression of the curly-haired man as he realized the situation was getting out of control…

Lily stubbed her cigarette on the brick wall as casually as she could and said to Severus: "Let's keep moving, shall we?"

They spent the rest of their afternoon poking around the Muggle bookstores and record shops off Charing Cross Road. Severus had very little interest in anything Muggle-related, but he was a good sport. And besides, neither of them was in a hurry to return home.

The record shops were a bit depressing to Lily. Even if she'd had the spare cash, there was no point in buying her favorite records: She couldn't play them at school. Mary Macdonald, a fellow Gryffindor, had sneaked in a record player last year, with the hopes of charming it into working, but try as the two girls might, they had no success.

"That's because there's too much magic around," Severus told her when she'd complained. "Muggle things don't work around magic."

"Yes, I know," Lily sighed. "But a girl can dream."

While the books of the magical world were wonderful, its music did not match up. The tunes that wafted from the Wizarding Wireless were stodgy and stale, and whenever her classmates switched on the radio, Lily often felt as though she'd been transported back to the 1950s. It was 1975, thank you very much, and all she wanted was to dance to David Bowie or Queen. Hell, she'd settle for the Beatles most days. But alas, it looked like it was going to be another year of nothing but Celestina Warbeck and the bloody Hobgoblins.

Eventually, to both their dismay, it was time to head home. Lily's imaginary shift was nearly over, and her dad would be expecting her. She hadn't told him she'd taken off work to come to London today. It wasn't that she thought he'd make a great fuss, it was just easier not to offer reassurances, not to have to explain about the Knight Bus, the triple-decker, outrageously purple Wizarding bus that hopped around the country in a thoroughly unnatural manner. Her father was supportive of her magic, but he struggled with it sometimes.

You would think, Lily mused as she and Severus climbed aboard the bus, that her father being a vicar, a man of the church, meant he might struggle less with the unknown and mysterious, but George Evans had always been a thoroughly logical man. And a bus that could travel from London to Manchester in mere moments did not fit into that logical worldview. So Lily had told him she was working today, simply because it was easier.

BANG.

With a jolt, the Knight Bus leapt from the crowded streets of London to somewhere near the South Downs, and Lily and Severus found themselves barreling along a frighteningly narrow road, clipping bits of hedge as a lorry sped by.

The Knight Bus was not Lily's preferred way to travel, nor was it the most efficient, but it did in the end get you from one place to another. That was about all that could be said for it. But as neither she nor Severus were old enough to apparate, and as neither of their homes were connected to the Floo Network, it was the only option. Severus, of course, had been the one to introduce her to it. He had introduced her to most things in the magical world.

The bus was nearly empty today, save for a witch who boarded outside Bath and an older Warlock who kept shooting lecherous glances at Lily from a few seats away. Severus, who was peering out the window, didn't seem to notice. Not for the first time that day, Lily wished she wasn't wearing Muggle clothing. She smoothed the pleats of her skirt self-consciously, then, eager to avoid the gaze of the leering Warlock, she picked up a discarded copy of the *Daily Prophet* that had fluttered near her seat with the bus's last leap. A headline blared out at her:

MINISTRY INSISTS DEATH EATER THREAT OVERBLOWN

Eugenia Jenkins, Minister for Magic, once again decried reports of increased Dark activity in Britain as grossly exaggerated, insisting the general public has nothing to fear. "These stories are rumor-mongering and irresponsible," Jenkins told reporters Saturday afternoon. "There have been a few isolated incidents with the group that refer to themselves as 'Death Eaters,' but nothing on the scale that has been suggested by the media. The Ministry of Magic has everything under control, thank you very much, and I would implore responsible journalists not to stir up a panic over such nonsense."

Whether the 'nonsense' Jenkins refers to includes the most recent attack in Salisbury or the grisly and well-publicized murder of a Muggle family in Leeds remains unclear as Jenkins quickly retreated to her office and refused further comment.

Though many Ministry officials have praised Jenkins for her calm despite the storm, Harmonia Lufkin, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has publicly clashed with the Minister for Magic on the issue. "In the past year alone, we have seen a significant uptick in magical attacks throughout Britain," said Lufkin, "and though it may be easy for most wizards to ignore, given the primary targets are Muggles, these attacks will continue to escalate if left unchallenged."

Though Jenkins has promised the Department of Magical Law Enforcement more resources to combat the growing threat, Lufkin claims it is not enough. "The time has come for comprehensive legislation aimed at protecting our most vulnerable neighbors and citizens: the Muggles of Britain."

Lufkin's proposed 'Muggle Protection Act' has been controversial throughout the halls of the Ministry and beyond. Abraxas Malfoy, who has been an outspoken opponent of Lufkin's legislation, derided the initiative as "alarmist twaddle that insults the very foundations of our noble Wizarding history."

BANG.

The paper flew from Lily's lap as the bus jumped another hundred kilometers, charging down the M4. It landed, most unfortunately, by the feet of the leering Warlock, where she decided to leave it.

Lily didn't get the *Daily Prophet* at home, so she was a bit out of the loop. She hadn't heard anything about an attack in Salisbury or Muggle murders in Leeds. Her thoughts once more were pulled back to Diagon Alley, and the curly-haired man…

"How come you left, anyway?"

Lily was yanked away from the memory by Severus's question. "What?"

"Flourish & Blott's. I've never known you to get bored in a bookstore."

"Oh," said Lily, rolling her eyes. "I ran into some old friends."

"Oh?"

"Black and Potter."

"Oh." Severus's expression clouded considerably. He liked those two boys even less than Lily.

“What did they want?”

“Just being their usual charming selves. They’re all pleased because Remus Lupin’s the other Gryffindor prefect, so they reckon they’re off the hook this year.”

Severus sneered. “Lupin? A prefect? Well, I guess Gryffindor isn’t exactly spoilt for choice.”

“Better Remus Lupin than Sirius Black,” said Lily firmly. “Everyone thought it would be him. I did too — because of his surname. But I guess that doesn’t matter as much in Gryffindor.”

She said this proudly, and Severus let out the faintest snort of derision. Lily chose to ignore it. Their respective houses — Gryffindor and Slytherin — would for many students at Hogwarts be an insurmountable challenge to friendship, but they had always made it a point not to let school rivalries come between them. Lily wasn’t about to start now.

Twenty very queasy minutes later, the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in Cokeworth, and the two friends debarked.

Cokeworth was quite possibly the least magical place Lily could imagine. It was a town made up of crooked alleys and dark, dingy terraced homes, all watched over by the great smoking mill of Spinner’s End, where Severus lived.

As they stepped off the bus, Lily noticed how instantaneously Severus’s demeanor changed. Here on the sooty streets of Cokeworth, he was smaller, angrier, defensive.

“Wish they could’ve dropped us off right at Hogwarts instead,” muttered Severus, wrapping his arms around his chest and glaring at the mill.

“Won’t be long,” said Lily. Then, after a pause, she ventured: “How are things? At home?”

“Same as always.”

“They’re still on strike, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The mill workers’ strike had been hovering over Cokeworth like a dark storm cloud, threatening to burst but never quite managing it, until finally in July the heavens split, the storm came, and Cokeworth was just another name on the long lists of strikes that were plaguing England that summer. Severus’s father had been unemployed for weeks.

“Dad says they’re shutting down the mill. For good.”

“What?” said Lily, aghast. “They can’t! That would ruin Cokeworth. That’s…that’s half the people employed here. More than half. That’s all of Spinner’s End!

“Like a bunch of a fascist swine in London give a fuck about Spinner’s End.”

“They just *can’t*.”

Severus shrugged. “We’ll see. Not like I care. In a year and a half I’ll be of age, and then I’m out of

this shite-hole for good. Never looking back."

"Sev."

"I mean it."

"I know."

They stood quiet for a moment in the shadow of the mill.

"I've got to get back," said Lily. "I'll see you soon, Sev. At school!"

Severus shoved his fists into his pockets. "Yeah. See you."

And he took off down Spinner's End, looking small and angry.

Lily sighed and began the walk back to her own house on Bobbin Street, down the path that led along the dirty, twisting river, past the grubby playground where she'd met Sev all those years ago, down the back lanes with their rubbish bins and should-be-white sheets hung out to dry, billowing like sails in the wind.

She reached her house, where the little garden she'd planted last summer was growing wilder than ever. It had been a form of self-therapy, this garden, and she'd filled it with all her mother's favorites: lavender and basil and mint and marjoram…but also a few plants that Petunia did not approve of like feverfew and mugwort.

"Nasty, ratty-looking plant," Petunia had complained.

Lily had started to point out that mugwort was excellent for use in invigoration potions, but she stopped herself. Why bother?

After pausing briefly to deadhead a few buds and rub a sprig of mint between her fingers, she pushed through the front door. It smelled of roast chicken — her mother's favorite meal to cook — and for some reason, for no reason at all, this warm aroma sent her spinning down spirals of memory, confronting her with the house's emptiness, its wrongness.

It had happened last summer. The illness had come on so quickly during Lily's third year at Hogwarts, while she was too far away to do anything about it. What could she have done? She'd been thirteen and not even a proper witch. Still, she'd spent hours in the library, trying to find a potion, a spell, anything that would heal her mother…but the doctors didn't even know what was wrong, until it was too late.

When Lily had arrived home for summer, her mother was practically gone, confined to bed, weak and suffering. Lily had spent that whole summer curled in the crook of her mother's arm, whispering stories of Hogwarts and magic because her mother loved them…planting the garden because her mother loved the smell of lavender, and Lily would bring it up to her room in bushels…

Until the funeral. Sickly sweet smell of chrysanthemums and lilies. Funeral flowers. Sympathy flowers. Death flowers. Two sisters standing on either side of their weeping father, as the casket was lowered into the dry August earth…

The sound of an oven clanging shut pulled Lily back to the present, and she slipped off her shoes, scolding herself for getting swept away. She headed towards the kitchen, where she could hear the radio droning: "Authorities have promised a thorough inquiry following the gas explosion in

Manchester last week that claimed the lives of dozens. Public officials have urged calm, saying there is no danger to the general public…"

"Absolutely ridiculous," said Petunia. "I hope someone gets sacked. You know Betty Parks told me — oh," she had noticed Lily enter the room. "There you are."

Petunia clicked off the radio.

The kitchen was a small, cramped affair. An ancient cooker hissed next to a deep enamel sink, and a squat dresser was pushed against the opposite wall, displaying Mrs. Evans' favorite china. A scrubbed wooden table took up the rest of the floorspace, and this was where Lily's father currently sat, reading a newspaper

"How was work, love?" he asked, glancing up from his paper.

"Oh, fine," lied Lily. "D'you know what I heard today? They're talking of closing down the mill!"

"Good," said Petunia, fussing with a pair of tongs. "Maybe this town will stink a little less."

"It's not good!" said Lily hotly. "It will ruin people's lives! They've got every right to strike — and I don't understand why they can't pay them a living wage to start with! Have you seen how they have to live down at Spinner's End?"

"Been talking to your boyfriend, have you?" sneered Petunia. She had never liked Severus.

"He's not my boyfriend, and that's not the point—"

"My sister, the socialist," sighed Petunia, setting the roast chicken down on the table.

Lily flared. "My sister, the fascist!"

"Girls."

Both Lily and Petunia stopped and turned to their father. He looked tired, as he always did these days, deep lines of sorrow and age grooved into his face. Lily immediately felt guilty, and Petunia shot her a disdainful look that said: *Look what you did now.*

"Let's just have a nice, quiet supper and be grateful for what we have, shall we?"

The two sisters took their seats on either side of their father. The empty chair for their mother was a presence of its own.

"Grace," said her father.

The girls sat in solemn silence as their father bowed his head over their meal.

"Give us grateful hearts, O Father, for all thy mercies…"

Lily turned and stuck her tongue out at Petunia.

"And make us mindful of the needs of others…"

Petunia made a face at Lily.

"Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

“Amen,” said the girls.

SIRIUS

The Brothers Black

The platform at Charing Cross Station was steamy with the end-of-summer heatwave, and Sirius could almost taste the sweat of Muggle commuters as he elbowed his way onto a crammed carriage of the Northern Tube line. He and James had parted at the Leaky Cauldron, the latter clapping him on the back and saying something vaguely encouraging like, “Chin up, nearly there.” So here Sirius stood on the Muggle Tube, clutching a sweat-slicked pole and swaying slightly as the train rattled through a long, dark tunnel. Sirius had gotten rather good at the Tube; not for nothing had he taken two years of Muggle Studies. It was true that he’d only signed up for the class to infuriate his mother, but nonetheless, he had to admit he found Muggles fascinating. Weird as hell, but fascinating.

Still, his mood sunk with every stop. He hadn’t wanted to leave, and James would’ve been happy to linger for hours on end, but dinner was approaching and if Sirius wanted to get back in the house unnoticed he only had a slim window of time.

At last, the train ground to a halt, a crisp voice announced, “Finsbury Park,” and Sirius stepped onto the platform with a group of laughing Muggle girls, all of whom, he noticed, were wearing impossibly short skirts. He followed them out of the station, watching with interest at the way the cotton fabric inched up their thighs as they climbed the stairs to Seven Sister’s Road. You’d never see a witch in that sort of getup. Witches all wore long skirts and stodgy robes and honorable cuffs. Muggles could be quite wonderful. Weird as hell, but wonderful.

As they reached the exit, one of the girls turned back towards him and called, “Take a picture, pretty boy. It’ll last longer.” And then they took off, giggling madly.

From here, it was only a short walk back to his home, but Sirius made it last as long as he could, lingering by dusty old storefronts and keeping a pace at which a tortoise might scoff. Despite this effort, he soon arrived at the little square in which number twelve Grimmauld Place hid.

‘Hid’ was the correct word, as the grand house was completely invisible to Muggles, and most magical people too. Sirius’s father was a paranoid old bastard who had placed upon his home every anti-Muggle security spell he could imagine. Sirius wasn’t sure why his parents were so convinced the Muggles would be banging at their door, but he suspected a traumatic incident with a door-to-door salesman. As a result, the place was Unplottable, among other things, which meant

you had to know where it was in order to find it. This was simple enough. Sirius approached the space between numbers eleven and thirteen and focused his mind on number twelve.

One might think it odd that the Blacks — an ancient Wizarding family as renowned for the purity of their ancestral line as for the intensity of their Muggle-loathing — would choose to set up home in a cramped townhouse, smack in the middle of Muggle London, but as he watched the grand door push its way out from between its neighbors, Sirius thought it suited his mother perfectly. Surrounded by the enemy, by scum and filth, she had someone to hate, somewhere to direct her fury. His mother always needed a war.

Sirius stood on the stone steps for a long moment, glaring at the door. Then, with a resigned sigh, he took hold of the silver handle and pushed.

It was locked.

He swore under his breath. He'd charmed it before he'd left so that the lock would stick and he could sneak back in without anyone noticing. That it was locked meant exactly the opposite had occurred: Someone had noticed. A simple *Alohamora* wouldn't work on this door, and Sirius had never been privy to the required spell…"for security purposes." He'd have to knock.

He rapped the serpent-shaped door knocker and waited. And waited some more. And a little more after that.

Perhaps this was to be his punishment for leaving without permission: They'd keep him locked out all night. It wouldn't be the first time, but now the laugh would be on them. Sirius wasn't twelve years old anymore. He wouldn't just sit there on the stone stairs, curled against the cold, waiting for dawn to rise, for someone to let him in. He had long since learned never to leave the house without a handful of Muggle coins, and if this was the game they wanted to play, he'd hop right back on the Tube and head to Diagon Alley. As with all respectable Wizarding institutions, the Black family had a standing account with the Leaky Cauldron. Sirius merely had to say what he desired — a pint, a room, a feast of nothing but puddings — and the staff would oblige, knowing the hefty bill would be paid without hesitation by the Black vault at Gringotts. Just as he was fantasizing all the ways he could rack up a really horrendous bill, the great door creaked open and the wizened hand of a house-elf appeared at knee-height.

"Took you long enough, Kreacher," said Sirius, giving the door a shove. The elf hastened backwards as Sirius pushed past him into the house. He threw a quick glance down the hall: It was empty, unless you counted the rows of family portraits, all watching him with disdainful looks on their stretched-canvas faces (except for Auntie Elladora, who was drooling in her sleep).

When he turned back, Kreacher had slunk into a low, snuffling bow. Sirius scowled. "Stop that, you look ridiculous."

The elf straightened up with a resentful glare. Sirius and Kreacher had never got on, primarily because the house-elf was so loyal to his Mistress, Sirius's mother. For his part, Sirius loathed the gnarled old elf in the same way he loathed the paintings on the wall, the troll-leg umbrella stand, the dark, gas-lit hall in which he currently stood. The elf was just another Black family relic.

"Young Master Sirius is expected in the drawing room," croaked Kreacher with apparent satisfaction.

"Goody," said Sirius, trying to swallow his snarl. "Guess I'd better head up."

Kreacher shot him a quick, wary look. "Perhaps Master Sirius would like to change his clothing

first?"

Sirius regarded his reflection in the large, silvery mirror that hung on the wall. He was dressed in Muggle jeans and an old t-shirt that read, "God Save the Queen." His hair fell long and loose into his eyes. That would annoy his mother nearly as much as the Muggle clothes. She desperately wanted to hack it off. Suddenly, he itched for a fight.

Ignoring the sensible voice in his head that told him to go upstairs, change, and be quiet, Sirius instead said, "Nah, I think I'm good," and strutted towards the stairs.

The drawing room was on the first landing; the door gaped ominously open. Pausing for only the briefest of moments, Sirius pushed forward into the room. His mother was seated with her back to him at her writing desk, emerald-plumed quill in hand, furiously composing a letter. She did not look up. He stood awkwardly for a moment, wondering if he should say something, but then she turned her head and glared at him.

"So." Her voice was dangerously low. That was never good. Shouting was her natural condition; quiet meant danger was afoot. He decided to head her off.

"All I did was go to Diagon Alley. What's so wrong with that? I didn't realize I was a prisoner in my own house."

His mother's eyes narrowed as she took in his appearance. "Dressed like this?" she hissed. "How *dare* you? How *dare* you even approach me, dressed like this?"

Sirius tugged at the collar of his shirt, as if surprised by her displeasure. "What, you don't like it? From what I've heard, it's all the rage with the Muggles…"

"Silence! You will not come in here and blatantly disrespect me."

Sirius sighed, a pantomime of suffering. "Well, you're the one who insulted *my* shirt."

"You are not fit to stand here, in the home of my forefathers, dressed like a filthy Muggle, utterly lacking any self-respect!"

His mother took a shuddering breath, her fury a storm suppressed. Then she stood abruptly and crossed the room to where a large tapestry covered the wall, faded and old. Sirius was of course familiar with the tapestry's contents. The Black family tree. He'd been forced to spend hours studying the golden threads that traced his family history back to the Middle Ages.

"Come here," his mother demanded imperiously.

Sirius ignored her, hoping he could goad her into the inevitable blowout fight so she'd get on with it and send him to his room.

"I said come *here*!" she snapped, slicing her wand through the air. Sirius felt something akin to a hook catch behind his ear, dragging him over to the tapestry.

"Ow!" he complained, rubbing his earlobe.

His mother regarded him coldly. Then she turned back to the tree, her finger following the gilded threads across the centuries, eventually landing on his own name, glittering at the end of it all. Sirius glared at it. It seemed to him that all his problems stemmed back to that glinting, golden line.

“You,” she said gravely.

“Yes, I can read.”

“How can I get it through your intolerably thick skull? Do you not realize that when you go out in public you carry the name of Black with you? You carry the weight of every name on this tree, and you bring shame upon us all, a stain of dishonor upon your own family! You are Sirius Orion Black III, heir to the Black name and fortune. Does that mean nothing to you?”

Sirius was about to inform her that no, actually, it didn’t mean a damn thing, but she didn’t give him the chance. Instead, she dove into one of her favorite orations: that of the Black family fortune.

The whole thing, really, was a complicated chess game at which his mother was master. Sirius had heard the story of his inheritance a thousand times in his fifteen years, but what it boiled down to was this:

By the turn of the 20th century, the Black family fortune had been split between two brothers: Sirius II and Cygnus. Sirius II, being the older son, had the bulk of the gold, but Cygnus was clever and married a Bulstrode heiress, filling his coffers with significantly more treasures than his brother’s. A jealous rift was cleaved between the two, and matters were only made worse when Cygnus purchased an expensive manor house he named Black Hall, clearly intending it to be a far grander home than the London house at Grimmauld Place. Sirius II passed what he referred to as the ‘rightful’ Black inheritance down the line to Orion, father of the now fifteen-year-old Sirius III, who currently stood glowering at the family tree.

On the other side, the Bulstrode-Black fortune was passed down and eventually ended up in the clutches of Walburga's oldest brother, Uncle Alphard, who did not play the role of heir particularly well. He was extravagant in his tastes and liked expensive horses, racing, gambling, and men. It became clear long before Sirius was ever born that Alphard would produce no heir. The younger son Cygnus II had only daughters…and this is where Walburga played her master stroke. She married her cousin, Orion Black, fusing together both fortunes and securing them with the birth of a son: Sirius Orion Black III. Her pride and joy. The boy on whose shoulders lay the entire future of the Black family legacy.

Or so his mother told him.

That stupid golden thread had wound its way around his life like a gilded chain. It would determine who he married, where he lived, what he did with his days. He didn’t want it. He didn’t want any of it.

As his mother pontificated, Sirius’s eyes wandered over to another branch of the tree, the thread that held his three cousins: Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa. Except where Andromeda’s name should’ve been there was a small, round burn. His mother had done that nearly three years ago when Andy had announced she was pregnant with a Muggle-born’s child. She’d been engaged to a brutish old wizard named Elzear Yaxley at the time. Apparently she’d been seeing the Muggle-born on the sly, until they slipped up and could hide the relationship no more.

It had been a big scandal, of course, and even Sirius who’d only been a second year had felt its ramifications. He remembered watching his mother burn off Andy’s name, her transparent glee at her sister-in-law’s shame. “Every tree needs pruning,” she’d crowed. Sirius had felt no glee. He liked Andromeda. She was the only cousin who was neither cruel nor condescending to him. She’d always done what she could to keep Bellatrix in line.

And he hadn't heard a word from her since.

Toujours pur…

"Can we just skip to the part where you call me the shame of your flesh and forbid me from ever leaving home again?"

This, he realized a moment too late, was a profound mistake.

"One day," said his mother, all quiet again, "you *will* learn respect. Very well. Go to your room. Your father will deal with you after dinner."

Sirius's bedroom was on the topmost floor of the house, and he stomped the whole way there, slamming the door shut behind him. He let himself fall backwards onto his bed, his limbs hanging loosely off the edges, and he stared up at the ceiling, a knot in his stomach. His mother he could handle. He'd gotten used to being screamed at. He could cope with missing a meal; he'd done it before. But his father? He didn't want to deal with his father.

He shouldn't have lost his temper. He only had a few more days to go. He shouldn't have provoked them. If he could've just kept his cool, then…then what? Mummy and daddy might still love him? He might've gotten some dinner? He scoffed in disgust with himself, then rolled over and punched his pillow. He didn't want their approval, their love, or their roast lamb. He just wanted this miserable summer to be over.

The door creaked. He jerked around to see his younger brother Regulus watching him from the hall. "What'd you have to go and sneak out for?" said Regulus, a note of reproach in his voice as he stepped into the room and shut the door quietly behind him. "Mother's all worked up."

Sirius chewed his tongue for a moment, trying to decide whether or not to harangue his brother for entering without permission. He settled on: "Did you tell her I'd gone out?"

"No. Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"I won't answer that. Kreacher, then?"

Regulus hesitated. "You can't blame him."

"Watch me."

"It's not his f-fault! It's…what he is."

"A conniving little shit?"

"A house-elf."

Sirius snorted. "Same difference."

"Don't be horrible."

Sirius regarded his brother with a cool, appraising eye. Everyone said they looked alike, but he didn't see it. Regulus was smaller, skinnier, a sniff of a boy. They shared the same dark hair, the same stormy gray eyes…but these days, that was all they shared.

“You make everything harder than it needs to be, you know,” said Regulus, mindlessly straightening a book on the desk. “It doesn’t have to be so difficult all the time. You antagonize them.”

His brother’s eyes scanned the room, which had admittedly been decorated specifically to infuriate their mother: Gryffindor red, Muggle pictures, the lot. Sirius noticed his brother’s gaze linger on a collection of posters of Muggle girls in skimpy swimsuits. Sirius grinned. “Sexy, aren’t they?”

Regulus turned away, flushing pink. “Don’t be obscene, Sirius.”

“It’s obscene to find naked girls sexy?”

“They’re Muggles.”

“Last I checked they had all the same parts. And much more interest in sharing them.”

“If you’re not going to listen to me at all…”

“Nope, I’m not. You can leave now.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

And Regulus left.

Feeling restless, Sirius got up and walked over to his desk. He stared for a few moments at the pictures he’d pasted on the wall over the years: mostly glossy prints of motorcycles he’d ripped from Muggle magazines. Sirius wanted a motorcycle something dreadful. Then his eyes fell on a picture he’d stuck up earlier that summer, the only real photograph he’d bothered to save: a picture of his friends. In it, he stood with James, Remus, and Peter. They were laughing. He was laughing. After weeks held captive with his cousins at Black Hall and now stuck here in this miserable old house, pacing his room like a caged animal, Sirius barely recognized that boy.

He tore his gaze from the photograph and reached instead for the calendar he kept by his desk. He grabbed a quill and scratched off another day before throwing himself back on the bed. His stomach growled.

“Chin up,” he muttered in a sour imitation of James. “Nearly there.”

Kreacher arrived a few hours later, sidling his way into Sirius’s bedroom without knocking. “Master Black is ready for you in the drawing room,” he croaked.

Sirius swallowed. His tongue felt dry against his sandpaper mouth. He had changed out of his offensive Muggle clothes, and he smoothed his robes as he stood. Silently, he followed Kreacher out of the room and down the stairs. The atmosphere of 12 Grimmauld Place, Sirius sometimes thought, was not at all unlike a storm cloud: dark and gloomy and foreboding, with steady rumblings and the occasional, flickering flash of violence. They reached the drawing room, and Kreacher opened the door with a creak. Sirius entered.

His father was standing at the window, hands clasped delicately behind his stiff back. A number of

rings adorned his fingers, and they glimmered in the pale evening light.

“Young Master Sirius,” Kreacher announced, and his father turned slowly, like a statue charmed to life.

“Thank you, Keacher. You may leave.”

They elf obeyed and pulled the door closed to just a crack. One large, glittering eye peered through until it too vanished with the shuffling of elf-feet.

Sirius’s father observed him, fingers held in a steeple before his face. He did not speak for several silent, intolerable moments. Then, at last, he said: “Is what your mother told me true? You snuck out of the house today against her express wishes?”

“Yes, sir.” There was simply no point in telling him that his mother had never expressly wished anything. The fact that he hadn’t asked permission would not help his case.

“And you went to Diagon Alley dressed in the clothing of Muggles, for all to see and judge?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You cavorted with a known blood traitor and besmirched the most valuable thing you possess, the honorable name of Black?"

Sirius chewed his tongue, a bitter, hateful taste in his mouth.

“Well?”

“Yes, sir.”

His father sighed deeply. “Very well.” He pulled his wand from his robes and examined the dark, knotted wood. Sirius felt every muscle in his body tense. *Don’t let him see you flinch,* he told himself furiously.

“Close the door,” commanded his father.

Sirius walked slowly towards the drawing room door, trying to steady his breathing. *Don’t let him see you flinch. Don’t let him see you flinch.*

The latch clicked shut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JAMES

Friends and Foes

“Now, James, you will behave this year, won’t you?”

“Very poorly, I’m sure,” said James cheerfully. His mother scoffed and mussed his hair fondly. They were standing on Platform 9 3/4 amid the chattering crowds of students, parents, owls, and cats. The Hogwarts Express, the steaming scarlet train that carried students from London to Hogsmeade each year, was waiting dutifully along the tracks.

“It’s lucky you’re so charming, boy,” said Mrs. Potter with a conspiring sort of smile. “Well, go on, give your mum a kiss and off with you.”

He obliged, kissed her on each cheek, and took off towards the train, waving brightly. His father had been too tired to come along this morning, but he had given James a weak-armed hug and told him to write often, study hard, and try not to make any professors quit this year. James had protested, saying that it wasn’t *his* fault the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor had left *again*, but his father had just laughed, and that laugh had turned into a wheeze, and then a rattling cough, and then his mother shooed him out.

As he pushed his way through the crowds, trying not to step on any cats, he turned his head from side to side, searching. And then he saw them: They were a grand-looking group, the Blacks. Mrs. Black was dressed in deep green robes that glimmered in the light streaming through the station’s arced rafters. She held a snake-skin purse in her hands and clutched it with a ferocity that suggested she expected someone to snatch it away at any moment.

Her two sons trailed behind her. Hurrying closely at her heels was Regulus. He was just a year behind Sirius at school, but he had the slight frame of a much younger boy. Everything about Regulus looked a bit pinched, as if he was used to trying to slip from view. Further behind still trudged Sirius, looking sulky and pushing a large trundling of luggage.

James hurried towards him as best he could. From a distance, he saw Mrs. Black say something to her sons. Regulus simply nodded but Sirius, who was behind her and not in her line of sight, made a rude gesture at her back. Then he looked up and saw James. With a grin, Sirius grabbed his trunk,

shoved the rest of the luggage at his brother, and strode off without another word to his family.

“All right?” said James as Sirius caught up.

“Quick, let’s get on before my mother tries to talk to me again.”

They hauled their trunks aboard the train and clambered up after them, tugging along through the carriages until they found their customary compartment at the end of the train. And it *was* their compartment. They had claimed it for good, as far as they were concerned, back in third year after they’d hexed a gaggle of fifth years who’d had the gall to try and sit there. Sirius had even scratched his initials under one of the luggage racks, so it was as good as official. Dumping their trunks, they dropped onto the seats and exchanged a grin. They were both more than pleased to be going back to school.

Draping himself over the seat, Sirius peered out the window. “Oh good, look — there’s Moony.”

James looked. Remus Lupin was crossing the platform with his mother and father, who he hugged quickly before turning back to the train. ‘Moony’ was a nickname that Sirius had come up with last year. It was so outlandishly obvious that it stuck. James wasn’t sure Remus liked it so much, but he was always a good sport.

Sirius went off to help Remus with his trunk, and James continued watching the students milling about on the platform. It was nearing time for departure, and everyone was moving a little quicker now. He gazed at them, feeling excessively fond of every form that crowded onto the train. People, he thought happily, were what made life interesting.

His thoughts were interrupted — as they often were — by a huffing Peter Pettigrew, who plunged his trunk through the compartment door and collapsed onto the seat across from James. “There you are,” he said, breathing heavily. “I was down at the wrong end of the train.”

“Pete, we sit here every year.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a big train.”

Peter Pettigrew was a round-faced, paunchy sort of boy, about a foot shorter than all his friends. Honestly, he was a bit hopeless at times. He’d started following James and Sirius around after the boys had befriended Remus, and though Sirius had been a bit scornful at first, James didn’t mind.

Sirius returned shortly, dragging behind him a laughing Remus Lupin. “I told you,” said Remus, “I’ve got to get up to the prefects’ carriage. We’re supposed to be having a meeting.”

“Boring,” said James.

“You can go up later,” said Sirius, hauling Remus’s trunk up onto the luggage rack. “First, you must sit and tell us all about your oh-so-exciting summer, because ours were rotten.”

“Mine was all right,” said Peter inconsequentially.

“I’ve really got to go, Sirius,” insisted Remus. “I don’t want to be late on the first day.”

“Surely point-docking and detention-giving can wait *five minutes*!” cried James, with a dramatic hand to his chest.

“You just want to take the piss out of me for being a prefect,” said Remus, though he was smiling.

“Never!”

“How could you think such a thing?”

“We’ve missed you.”

“We’ve been sick with longing!”

“The bards will write poetry about this summer of sorrow—”

“—without Remus John Lupin by our side...”

“Yes, yes, all right. Tone it down a notch, will you?” laughed Remus, and he agreed to sit for a few minutes before heading down to the prefects’ carriage. Of course, a ‘few minutes’ turned into five, then ten, then twice that, and suddenly Remus was jumping up and hurtling out the compartment door, calling them all some not-so-nice names as he went — though, admittedly, with a grin on his face.

Through the windows of the train, James watched the shadows of London disappear into sunlit pastures dotted with sheep. Remus was still not back from his prefect meeting, and the three boys were getting bored. They’d played a few rounds of exploding snap, but after re-growing his eyebrows for the third time, James had decided he’d had enough of that.

“Wish the food cart would get here,” grumbled Sirius. “I’m starved.”

“I’ll have a look,” said James, standing up and sliding open the compartment door. He peered around the corner, hoping to hear the trundling of a cart down the aisle, but he was disappointed. Just as he was about to step back into the compartment, however, a door further down the train slid open and the pale, bony form of James’s least favorite person emerged.

Severus Snape was a boy in James’s own year. He had a look about him that suggested he hadn’t seen a bar of soap in a long time, and his greasy black hair fell in strands about his face like a wilted plant. He was a Slytherin, which in James’s mind meant he was evil and — more importantly — fair game. Presently, Snape was trudging though the aisle, hands clenched in his pockets, glancing into compartments as though he was searching for someone.

“Looking for all your friends, Snivellus? Might take a little while. It’d probably help to make some first.”

Snape’s head whipped around, and James realized a moment too late that the clenched fist was holding a wand. James’s own wand was resting casually on the seat behind him, having been used to fix his sorry eyebrows moments earlier. He didn’t hear the curse Snape hissed, but with a flash and a bang, something hot whizzed his way and snapped his nose; blood began to spurt from his nostrils. James swore in pain as Snape scurried back the way he had come. “Coward,” he spat after him. “You’re going to pay for that!”

He slammed the compartment door shut, one hand still cupping his bleeding nose. “Well, that wasn’t very sporting,” he said furiously as blood spilled over his lips and onto his teeth.

“Slimy git,” said Peter.

Sirius was on his feet. “Want me to go after him?”

“Nah, just get my trunk, will you? I’ve got a book in there on healing spells, but I can’t remember

the right charm."

Sirius obliged and, after a bit of rummaging, tossed him a copy of *The Healer's Helpmate*.

"Thanks," said James, flipping through the book with one hand, still clutching his nose with the other. "Oh here we go." He pointed his wand at his face and said, "*Episkey*." A cool shiver ran down the bridge of his nose and the blood stopped flowing. James sighed in relief. "Glad that worked. I've never tried it before."

Sirius snorted. "What's with the medical books? Taking the career planning portion of fifth year rather seriously, are you?"

"Hardly," said James with a shrug. "Just thought it'd be useful. I get tired of having to go to Pomfrey every time I decide to have a duel." He wiped the blood from his face with an old kerchief and scowled. "Well, good to know old Sniv and I are starting the year on *friendly* terms, eh?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! As this was a shorter chapter, I will be posting the next chapter (which is also on the shorter side) on Wednesday. Going forward, I plan to post new chapters weekly on Mondays, with occasional additional updates on Wednesdays for shorter installments when they arise. :)

Any and all feedback is appreciated!

Princes and Castles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SEVERUS

Princes and Castles

“You’re going to pay for that!”

As Severus hastened away from Potter’s compartment, the threat followed him, haranguing him down the train’s clattering corridor. *You’re going to pay for that.*

Severus knew this to be true. History had taught him as much, and what he’d just done — hexing Potter — had been foolish. It had been unthinking self-preservation that had spurred his wand — and it had felt *good*, seeing the blood gush from the face of his enemy — but he knew he would be punished for it later. James Potter always made sure he was punished. Four years, they’d been enemies...starting on this very train.

He could still remember it perfectly, the way they’d teased and goaded him, humiliating him in front of Lily, the way they’d branded him with the nickname “Snivellus” before they even reached school, the way that horrible name had followed him all around the castle ever since…because of Potter and his blood traitor thug of a friend Black. They’d made his life hell for four years, and he had no doubt they’d carry on for a fifth.

Hatred burned in Severus’s heart and they weren’t even halfway to Hogwarts.

It wasn’t Potter’s jibe about his lack of friends that had bothered him. What did Severus Snape care about friends? Friends were for lesser minds, cretins who had so little stuffing in the space between their ears that they spent all their time blundering around in barbarous packs, drinking butterbeer and setting off dungbombs. Severus didn’t need *friends*. He had ambitions. He had talents. He had goals. And besides, he *did* have a friend. He had a best friend.

He just couldn’t find her right now.

He thought he’d glimpsed Lily Evans’ red hair on Platform 9 3/4, but then, turning to glower at a third year who’d just run over his toes with a trolly, he’d lost her in the crowd. So here he was, plodding along the churning halls of the train. He’d nearly made it to the end — where he was sure she must be — when the hated Potter had thrust his stupid head out of his compartment, and

Severus had reacted, and now he was going to pay for that.

He hurried along the way he'd come, this time merely searching for an empty seat. He'd given up on finding Lily. She was probably sitting with that brainless friend of hers anyway…Mary MacSomething. He knew he shouldn't begrudge her having other friends, friends in her own house, but at times he guarded their friendship as jealously as a small child with a new toy: *He'd* found her first.

It was a cruel twist of fate that had sent Lily Evans to Gryffindor House. She should've been in Slytherin. He'd seen the ambition in her eyes, the shock of excitement, the thrill of destiny that lingered behind those deep emerald irises. Destiny…yes. He had known it since he'd first started watching her, back in Cokeworth. He could hardly believe that something so beautiful, so good, had come from such a horrible place. She had stood out to him like a diamond in the coal dust, and he had known then that she had a far greater destiny than that grimy little mill town.
Just like him.

Severus had always known he was better than Cokeworth. As a child, his mother had whispered him secrets, stories about magic, and a castle to which he would be whisked away, far from the oppressive grime of their shoddy little two-up-two-down. He was special, she'd told him…he came from a long line of pure-blood wizards…he was the last of their line…he was a Prince.

Princes and castles…it didn't take Severus long to learn that fairytales were a crock of shit.

Severus never could understand why his fool of a mother gave up her pure-blood name for filth like his father, stupid and illiterate, poor as dirt, and a Muggle to boot. But then, Severus understood very little about his mother. She disappeared a lot. Not physically — she was always in the house. Severus couldn't actually remember the last time she'd left their cramp of a home. But there were vast stretches of time when she seemed to fly away from her body until all that was left was a husk of woman, sitting in a worn armchair, staring out a grimy window at a dark road…and nothing could bring her back, not Severus's pleas, not his father's fists. Then one day, she'd return, smile vaguely as if remembering she had a son, and they would go on.

He resented her for it. How dare she leave when he could not?

But in the end, he did leave, just like she always said he would. Whisked away by magical train to a castle where nobody knew he was a Prince. Instead, he was just that Snape boy, grimy and gray like Cokeworth itself, a half-blood, son of a filthy millworker…

But he'd show them. He'd show them all what this half-blood Prince could do.

He had plans this year. Big plans…and James Potter and everyone else who tormented him… they'd pay for their crimes.

Oh yes, he thought bitterly, shoving his way into a partially-occupied compartment and folding himself into the corner seat. *You're going to pay for that.*

Chapter End Notes

> Like I said, just a wee little chapter today so Severus could have some feelings. Next update will be Monday, and back to your regularly scheduled 4,000 word chapters. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SIRIUS

The Marauder

As the train hurtled through the wild-looking highlands, farther and farther away from London, Sirius Black felt a weight inside him lighten. He laughed with his friends, he ate pasties and sweets and defaced with inky quills the famous wizards on Chocolate Frog cards. Daylight became dusk, and dusk turned to deep, black night, and by the time the scarlet steam engine pulled into Hogsmeade Station, Sirius felt like a different person. The towering specter of his mother, his father, his whole rotten family seemed to melt away with the mizzling rain that pit-patted against the windows.

The train ground to a halt, and the students aboard scrambled to their feet, scooping up owls, and rats, and cats who loudly vocalized their dislike of being scooped. Sirius and his friends made their way lazily through the din, pushing across the platform and up the muddy track to where the horseless stagecoaches awaited.

They clambered into an empty carriage which promptly took off, swaying side-to-side with the clip-clop of invisible hooves. The carriage smelled like musty stables, and for a moment, Sirius was transported back to Black Hall. His Uncle Alphard kept a huge stable of all sorts of beasts — Aethonians and Abraxans and the regular old wingless steeds as well. He even kept a unicorn for a short period of time before some Ministry duffer stepped in, liberating from captivity both the silver mare and his uncle's remaining civility towards government.

Sirius actually rather liked the horses, a secret he held close to his chest, lest his Uncle Alphard think they had something in common. He didn't give a flying fuck about hunting, but he liked the stables, the rich, earthy smell of sweat and manure, the calm, heavy presence of the enormous winged beasts.

It had been his place of escape this summer. At least, at first — until Regulus let slip to Narcissa just where Sirius had been running off to all the time, and Narcissa had brightly informed Uncle Alphard that his nephew had the makings of a great horseman. There had been no escaping his uncle after that. As usual, Regulus ruined everything.

Sirius was jolted back to the present as the carriage took a particularly sharp turn, causing all four

of its passengers to lurch uncomfortably. Peter, who had been craning for a glimpse of the castle, smacked his forehead against the window frame.

“Who’s driving this thing, anyway?” said James cheerfully. Then he returned to whatever subject he’d been prattling on about before, because of course he’d been talking the whole carriage ride, either unaware or unconcerned that Sirius hadn’t been paying any attention. That was one of James’s great gifts: He could fill any space, large or small, with cheerful, incessant chatter.

The carriage drew round the curve of the muddy road, towards the great wrought iron gates that guarded the castle, and then…there was Hogwarts, its towers and turrets rising up from stone as though reaching for the moon, the candle-lit windows twinkling in the dark.

Finally.

With squelching shoes, Sirius and his friends climbed out of the carriages and joined the throng of students spilling through the great oak doors into the torch-lit entrance hall and across the flagged stone floor to the Great Hall, where the four House tables sat under a starry canopy of night sky. The boys crammed their way into seats near the end of their table and looked around happily at the rapidly-filling Hall. They were joined shortly by David Montgomery, the Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and a few of his friends. James and Montgomery greeted each other and quickly fell into an enthusiastic discourse about this year’s team and prospects.

Sirius, who was not overly interested in the political intrigue of building a new Quidditch team, turned his attention to Remus and Peter. “Wish they’d hurry up with the sorting,” complained Peter. “I’m *hungry*.”

“You’re always hungry,” said Sirius.

“Well, I’m extra-hungry right now.” Peter glared at the doors of the Great Hall, as if willing them to open. Obligingly, they did, and Gryffindor’s stern-faced Head of House entered, leading a long procession of fidgeting first years to the front of the Hall. Once they were all congregated there, the first years sending shifty glances at their peers or up at the star-scattered ceiling, Professor McGonagall placed an extremely tattered pointed hat upon a stool.

Everyone stared at it expectantly, and then the brim of the hat flapped open, and the Sorting Hat began to sing:

"Many, many years ago
When I was just a hat,
In olden days of magic yore,
On Godric’s head I sat.
I saw it all, a front row seat,
As four friends came together
To build a school, the greatest yet,
That time would ever weather.
And to these founders four,
A House was bestowed each
That they might choose the students
They most desired to teach.
Good Gryffindor, the first of four,
He chose the brave and bold;
Wise Ravenclaw took those of wit
And brain to be enrolled;
Dear Hufflepuff, fair and kind,

Liked those of loyal heart;
Shrewd Slytherin claimed for him
Those of purest start.
But time plays tricks upon us all,
Runs skipping whilst we sleep.
As Hogwarts grew, the four, they knew,
Eternal life they could not keep.
I watched the founders fumble
As they grew bent with age,
And questioned how to sort the lot
Without their wisdom sage?
They searched the land for answers
And despaired when nothing came
'Til one mad day, a thought took root
In Gryffindor's old brain.
And from his pate he whipped me off
And handed me about,
Said, "Stuff your brains inside my cap,
And he will sort them out."
And so I'm here, at each new year,
To divvy up the throng.
Slip me on, I'll peek inside,
And choose where you belong."

The Great Hall erupted with applause as the hat concluded its song.

"You know," said Sirius over the clamor, "you've got to respect a man who decides to leave major life-altering decisions to his *hat*. Takes guts, that does."

"Good ol' Godric!" laughed James, still applauding.

Professor McGonagall was now unfurling a long scroll of parchment from which, Sirius knew, she would call out the first years' names to go up and put on the hat.

"Atkins, Marjorie!"

A tiny girl who barely looked old enough to be there scrambled up to the stool, sat down, and promptly vanished under the wide brim of the Sorting Hat. After a moment's pause, the hat shouted, "RAVENCLAW!" and Marjorie Atkins hurried off towards the applause of the Ravenclaw table.

"Branstone, Clarence!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Carmichael, Adelaide!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

'Chadwyck, Benson' became the first new Gryffindor student, and Sirius joined the rest of the table in whooping applause as timid-faced Chadwyck squeezed in between a group of third years, looking entirely overwhelmed.

Sirius couldn't fault them for their nerves. He remembered that walk, the long trudge past the rows

and rows of older students' craning eyes, the room heavy with anticipation, with expectation…and the final, judgmental plop of the Sorting Hat upon his head. Sirius had actually felt properly ill when Professor McGonagall had called out his name.

Sirius Black was supposed to be in Slytherin. That's what he had been told since he was born. Since before he was born. It was his birthright. Generation after generation after generation of Blacks had been sorted into Slytherin. He couldn't name a single ancestor who hadn't been — and that was saying something, as he had regularly been quizzed on family genealogy growing up. It had never even occurred to him that he might be sorted elsewhere. At least…not until he had met James Potter on the Hogwarts Express. James, who was friendly and funny, and who within moments of stepping on the train had gathered new friends around him like moths to a flame. James, who had sounded so surprised when Sirius had told him all his family had been in Slytherin.

"Blimey," James had said, "and I thought you seemed all right!"

Sirius would never forget the words that followed this, the premonition that came from his own mouth: "Maybe I'll break the tradition."

He had said these words intoxicated with the dizzying sense of freedom that grew with every mile the train sped away from Grimmauld Place. He had said them unthinking, wanting to impress the clever new friend he had just met, the boy who thought anyone in Slytherin was bad news. For the briefest of moments, he had even believed it. Maybe he would break the tradition.

But as Professor McGonagall called his name — "Black, Sirius!" — and he marched towards the Sorting Hat, his confident swagger belying the terror in his gut, that belief had shriveled away. He was a Black. He belonged in Slytherin. The last thing he had seen before the hat covered his eyes was James Potter giving him a hopeful thumbs up.

"Another Black, eh?" said the hat. Sirius had hunched his shoulders defensively at this. Here it was. The hat would yell, "SLYTHERIN!" and Sirius would have to face the disappointed look of his new friend, who would surely write him off as a lost cause. He would have to march over to the Slytherin table, where his cousin Narcissa was undoubtedly waiting to fulfill her sweetly-delivered promise to his mother that she would "keep an eye on him at Hogwarts." He would have to sit there, for seven years and the rest of his life, living under the shadow of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. He knew all this, and what's more, he knew he didn't want it.

"You already know where you belong, then?" the Sorting Hat had said slyly into his ear. And before Sirius could even brace himself for the inevitable, the hat had yelled loudly and clearly to the entire school: "GRYFFINDOR!"

He had taken a few startled, stumbling steps towards the Slytherin table before realizing what had just happened and redirecting himself towards the cheering mass of students in red and gold. Did they know? Did they know they had a Slytherin among them? Reaching his table, his new house, he had thrown a tentative glance over his shoulder at the Slytherins. Narcissa was sitting there, her dainty mouth formed in a horrified 'o', her thin fingers trailing across her lips as though she could not quite believe what had just happened.

And neither could he. Sirius Black, first son and heir to the Black family — the most ancient and pure and respected of all the pure-blood families — had just been sorted into the house of blood traitors and Mudbloods. And then from across the Great Hall, Narcissa had caught his eye. He couldn't help it. It was so…*funny*.

Sirius had started laughing.

Back in the present, “Parkinson, Peregrine” was sorted into Slytherin, and without his intending that they do such a thing, Sirius’s eyes flitted over to the Slytherin table and landed on his brother. Regulus was clapping with the faintly bored expression he always wore when doing something out of duty. Regulus did everything out of duty. How often in their childhood had Sirius listened to his parents berate his younger brother? How often had they told him he was useless, worthless, a feeble, sniveling little child who was bound to disgrace them? And all because little Reg had dropped a crystal goblet during dinner.

And yet — and yet, as soon as Sirius had revealed himself to be the disappointment, the disgrace, the unsuitable heir, how quickly, and how proudly had Regulus taken up the mantel of favored son?

Of course, Sirius’s parents hadn’t given up on him completely when he’d been sorted into Gryffindor. The next morning he had received a long and furiously-written furl of parchment from his mother, listing all the acceptable Gryffindors with whom he may socialize and offering a detailed set of rules on how to comport himself amongst the filth. She was upset, ashamed, furious, disgusted…but not quite ready to write off her first-born son.

After this summer, however, he thought she might be a bit closer.

Finally, “Wood, Patricia” was sorted into Gryffindor, and the Headmaster stood up to address the school. Professor Dumbledore, Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, had an undeniable presence; the Great Hall fell silent immediately.

“Welcome,” said Dumbledore, beaming at them all through half-moon spectacles, “to students old and new. I am sure you are all quite famished and ready for our excellent feast, but before we begin, a few start-of-term notices. First, Mr. Filch has asked me to remind you all that magic is strictly forbidden in the corridors, as are any Zonko’s products classified by Mr. Filch as ‘Dangerous or Destructive,’ and he would like me to emphasize that he — ah — ‘really, really means it this time.’”

A few students tittered. Sirius smirked.

Dumbledore politely ignored this and continued on. “Second, any student interested in trying out for their House Quidditch team should, as always, give their name to their Head of House.”

James muttered something to Montgomery, who grunted appreciatively.

“Finally,” said Dumbledore, “and most importantly, we have a new staff appointment to announce: Professor Dearborn has happily agreed to take the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts this year.” The wizard next to Dumbledore stood and waved at the sea of students before him. He looked young — far younger than their other professors — with a handsome face topped by a generous coif of chestnut hair. As he turned to murmur something to Dumbledore, Sirius noticed a thin, angry scar that stretched from forehead to chin, as though someone had tried to slice him open.

James leaned to mutter in Sirius’s ear: “Think this one can hack it?”

Sirius shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

“And now,” finished Dumbledore, spreading his robed arms wide so that the stars upon his sleeves glittered in the candlelight, “let us feast.”

At these words the tables before them filled suddenly with a wide array of roasts and pies, platters

of carrots and peas, mashed potatoes and chips, tureens of soup, and sauceboats of gravy. Sirius piled onto his plate as much as he could fit, and soon the Great Hall was filled with the happy clatter of cutlery as students delved enthusiastically into their meal.

Beside him, Remus's eyes were still on the new professor. "He looks awfully young to teach," he said, spooning Brussels sprouts onto his plate.

Sirius shrugged. "As long as he's better than old Archie last year, I don't care. What a waste of a class that was."

"Mmmmph mmgood," agreed Peter through a mouthful of roast chicken.

"Swallow first, Pete, then speak," suggested Remus.

"I said, I hope he's good," clarified Peter. "I'd like to pass my O.W.L.s."

"He's a professor, Peter, not a miracle worker," said Sirius, smirking as Peter flipped him off.

On his other side, James was deep in conversation with Montgomery. "It'll be hard to replace Podmore," Montgomery said heavily. "He and Shacklebolt worked so well together."

"Selfish git," said James cheerfully, stabbing at his potatoes. "What'd he have to go and pass his N.E.W.T.s for?"

"Didn't he get recruited to the Tornadoes?" asked Sirius.

"Nah, that was Coningsby, the year before. Dunno what Podmore's up to. Hey—!" James's face suddenly brightened. "I know! Sirius, you should try out for Beater this year."

Sirius snorted into his goblet. "Yeah, right."

Montgomery was giving him an appraising look. "Do you fly?"

"Of course he does. He's excellent," said James.

"Not a chance, mate," said Sirius.

"Oh come on. You'd make a great Beater. Who has more pent up rage than you?"

"Cute."

"Gryffindor needs you! You love Quidditch!"

"I love sleeping. Especially on Saturday mornings."

James scowled. "Lazy sod."

"And proud of it."

"Well, anyway," said Montgomery, helping himself to some rhubarb crumble as the golden plates filled themselves with an assortment of puddings. "I'm going to schedule trials for next weekend. I've already had several people stop me on the train to ask about Chasing, so the sooner the better, I think."

James dropped his fork with a clatter. "But we don't need new Chasers. You, me, and Collins. We're a great team."

“Sure, but I still want to try out any new faces. You never know what talent is hiding out there.”

James looked deeply disturbed by this information. “Is this about that Bludger last year? Because I thought we agreed that wasn’t my fault.”

“It’s not about the Bludger, and it’s nothing personal, *relax*. I’m sure you’re still one of our best, but it doesn’t hurt anything to open trials, does it?”

“Yeah,” said James. “Sure.”

But Sirius could tell he did not agree.

Eventually, when everyone had eaten their fill and the plates began to clear, Dumbledore stood to dismiss them. Feeling quite full and heavy, the boys took their time while the rest of the Great Hall clambered towards the doors. But then, their leisurely departure was interrupted by a voice from behind. “Remus?”

They all turned. Lily Evans was standing there, her prefect’s badge pinned neatly to her robes. James and Sirius both leapt to their feet at once, raising their hands in a sharp, coordinated salute. “Sir, yes, sir!” they shouted in unison. A group of students nearby all laughed.

Lily offered a wry smile. “At ease,” she said coolly. “Remus, we’re supposed to lead the first years up to the dormitory, remember?”

“Oh, right,” said Remus, looking flustered as he dropped his napkin onto his plate. He had clearly forgotten.

“Merlin, Remus,” said Sirius, shaking his head. “What kind of a prefect are you? Forgetting about the first years…”

“Yes, if you’re going to be Captain Goody-Two-Shoes, you’re going to have to try a *little* harder,” said James.

“Shut up,” said Remus, as he climbed out of his seat.

“Sir, yes, sir!” cried James, who could never leave a good punchline alone.

“You’re hilarious,” said Lily in a bored voice. Then she turned on her heel and marched towards the mass of first years collected near the door. Remus hurried after her.

“Be good, now!” called James in a shrill voice. “Don’t lose any of the wee ones. Remember, it’s frowned upon if they fall off a staircase in the first week!”

“Yeah, at least make it to week two before you off one,” shouted Sirius while James and Peter laughed.

Remus turned and gave them one last exasperated look.

“They grow up so fast!” moaned James, throwing an arm over Sirius’s shoulder in mock despair. “It seems like only yesterday we were struggling to convince him to set off a dungbomb in the girls’ toilet.”

“And now look at him,” sighed Sirius. “A prefect! For shame!”

Lazily, Sirius, James, and Peter drifted out of the Great Hall behind the throng of students. They followed the mass of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws up the marble staircase, but then the three boys turned in the opposite direction of their peers and slipped behind a faded Celtic tapestry and up a narrow staircase. After all, thought Sirius, brushing a spider off his shoulder (there were *always* spiders in this stairwell) there was no point knowing about shortcuts if you didn't use them.

Sirius and James knew *lots* of shortcuts. They had spent much of their previous four years exploring the castle, often after curfew, often in an attempt to escape Hogwarts' cantankerous caretaker, Filch. They were hardly the first students to realize the castle held many secrets, but Sirius suspected few had tackled the mystery with as much enthusiasm and diligence as the Marauders.

The Marauders. That's what they called themselves. It had started as a joke during second year when Filch had caught the four boys plundering the kitchens after curfew. The caretaker had yelled all sorts of nasty things at them, but their favorite had been when he accused them of "marauding and pillaging the castle like filthy pirates." They had gotten a week's worth of detention for their little adventure, but it had been worth it if only for the cool new name.

It was a very long, steep stairwell, and the boys continued to climb. Sirius didn't mind. With every stride, he felt himself relaxing back into the intimacy of the castle, with each stair he stepped back into himself.

The secret stairwell emerged by a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, who James patted fondly on the knee as they passed. Thanks to their little shortcut, the boys reached the entrance to the common room before any of their peers.

The Gryffindor common room was guarded by a portrait of an exceptionally large woman draped in pink silk, and she gazed at them all imperiously as they approached. "Password?" she demanded.

"Shit," said Sirius. "Did either of you ask Remus the password?"

James scratched his nose. "Nope, I forgot."

"Don't look at me," said Peter. "I can never remember them anyway."

Luckily, a cacophony of giggles and chatter told them the rest of Gryffindor house was not far off, and sure enough, a mass of students rounded the corner a moment later.

"Chwyrligwgan," announced a fourth year, looking vaguely overwhelmed by the preponderance of consonants. The Fat Lady swung open, and the students began to stream through.

"Welsh," muttered Sirius as he climbed through the portrait hole. "I bet you anything that's Remus's fault."

"It's a dangerous thing, giving a Welshman power," agreed James.

The Gryffindor common room looked as cozy as ever, with fireplaces sending a warm glow over the many armchairs, sofas, and poufs that filled the room. The mass of students, stomachs full and eyelids drooping, headed towards bed, and Sirius and his friends followed, climbing the spiral staircase to their own dormitory at the tip-top of Gryffindor Tower.

"Just as we left it," said James happily, dropping onto his four-poster bed and pulling off his shoes.

And so it was. Just as they'd left it: the four beds, draped in Gryffindor red; the worn, tattered rug underfoot; the small squashed sofa, stolen from the common room, the one they'd managed to laboriously levitate up the spiral staircase last term. They were surprised to find it still there. James had thought the house elves would probably reclaim it over the summer, but Sirius reckoned they left it alone because the house elves, as a rule, avoided all but the most basic of cleaning in this particular dormitory ever since the boys' second year, fearing booby traps. ("That was one time," complained James, when Sirius voiced this opinion, "and the booby trap wasn't meant for *them*.")

Funny how this dormitory felt more like home than Grimmauld Place ever had.

His thoughts were diverted by the arrival of Remus, who looked sleepy but pleased. "All first-years accounted for," he announced. "I'm proud to say there was not one death on my first day."

"Keep it up, Moony, and there just may be a Head Boyship in your future," said James.

"Merlin, this place has low standards," said Sirius.

Remus knelt to rummage in his trunk for his pajamas. "Lily Evans certainly thinks so. Pretty sure she thinks I'm completely useless."

"Well, you did forget about the first years," said Sirius.

"*And* you were late to your first meeting on the train," said James.

Remus looked up indignantly. "And whose fault was that?!"

"Come now, Remus," said James seriously. "You're a prefect. You've got to resist our pernicious influences."

"Alas, I am but a weak man."

"That's the spirit."

Then Remus threw a pillow at James, hitting him squarely in the face and knocking his glasses askew. So James threw a pillow at Remus, who dodged it, and the pillow hit Peter instead. And then, for a moment, the dormitory seemed to be full of nothing but flying pillows and the occasional shoe, until all four boys fell back laughing onto their beds, exhausted and delighted to be back in each others' company at last. Sirius yawned and look around the room. James was cleaning his perpetually-smudged glasses, Peter was picking pillow-feathers off his pajamas, and Remus, it seemed, was already asleep.

Sirius was not a sentimental sort of person. He preferred to mock those who were too open with their emotions. But as he looked at these three boys, his friends, something in him twinged — just a little. Here, with them, in this dormitory, he was not *Sirius Orion Black III.* He was not the heir of some great destiny, the end of the gilded line. He was just Sirius: Gryffindor, trouble-maker extraordinaire, Marauder.

That's who he was.

Inheritance be damned.

Chapter End Notes

...yes, I'm sorry, I wrote an entire Sorting Hat song...I can't help it, I'm a sucker for bad poetry. :P

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!